

Snowmobiling in the Great Burn

Snowmobiling history:

Snowmobilers started riding in the Great Burn during the late 70's. Early access in the southern portion was off the 500 road to Blacklead Mountain and, for the most part, limited to the ridges. Snowmobiles of that time could not climb out of bowls such as Goat Lake. Access into the Surveyor region was over Schley Mountain and then into the Kid Lake area via a jeep trail. This trail has now grown over and is unusable. The Hoodoo area was accessed primarily through the creek drainage to Hart Lake, an area now closed to snowmobiles. In the mid 1980's, snowmobiles became more mountain usable and additional areas such as Williams Lake, Frog Creek and Goose Lake became accessible.

Use levels from Stan Spencer:

Analysis of area usage is obviously subjective, but I believe my estimates are within reasonable parameters. I ride with a group of people who generally snowmobile in the Great Burn one or two days during the week. I have also asked two other groups that ride the same areas, primarily on weekends, for their input.

On week days we usually ride between Wednesday and Friday and see an average of 2 to 4 other riders. When added to our group's average of 4 to 6 riders we have a total of 6 to 10 per day. These numbers hold about the same in any of the riding areas in the Great Burn.

On weekends the numbers jump to 10 and 20 per day for each area, the numbers fluctuating with weather and snow conditions. I have counted as many as 40 sleds at Kidd Lake on a sunny spring day and ridden in the same area when the weather and snow conditions were less inviting and not encountered another sled. Also, weekdays seem to get busier during the last half of the week. I would suggest that the weekly numbers would trend to the lower side of my estimate. I did not include Crooked Fork as a separate area because it can be accessed from the Williams Lake area.

My conservative estimate of weekly usage for the three main Great Burn areas is between 70 and 100 riders on weekdays and 90 to 120 on weekends for a total usage range of 160 to 220 snowmobilers. The months of February through March will likely see higher numbers because this is the prime time to access the area for locals, and more out of State snowmobilers are making this area a destination.

The Great Burn area is important to snowmobilers for multiple reasons:

- It is one of the few primitive back country snowmobile settings still accessible in the lower 48 States and certainly one of the best. There are no groomed access roads or trails and the terrain can be challenging. All of this has great appeal to a certain segment of the snowmobiler community. While some snowmobilers prefer riding on groomed and/or well defined trails, others want a more primitive experience with a combination of challenge and magnificent scenery. This is no different than summer users, some of whom prefer the roads and developed facilities and others who want the challenge of backpacking into our wildlands.
- The snowmobilers who seek the primitive backcountry experience value it for the same reasons summer users want it: solitude, challenge, and appreciation of the spectacular scenery.

- Statistics produced by the FS in the ROS portion of the Clearwater Forest Plan Assessment show that snowmobiling access to the Clearwater NF has increased approximately 100 percent between 2006 and 2011, while primitive camping access has remained static (page 21). This clearly demonstrates snowmobiling is a growing recreational activity and demonstrates the need for more access to suitable riding area, not less. At the very least future management should keep historic riding areas open.
- There are no winter user conflicts in the Great Burn. Closing the area pushes those who now use it into areas shared by multiple users and actually paves the way to increased user conflict.

The Future of the Great Burn:

The snowmobile community would like the area to remain as it is now; a primitive, roadless backcountry area. The Great Burn has been accessed by snowmobilers for the past 35 years with no known impact on its resources. The only notable change is an increase in vegetation having nothing to do with snowmobiling activity. The area is adequately protected under existing laws and the Idaho Roadless Rule. However, if for some reason the case is made that additional protection is needed, it should not be wilderness designation. Other designations, such as National Recreation Area or Protection Area are far more suitable and can be tailored to the uses, public needs and resources of the area. Under no conditions should those portions of the Great Burn traditionally enjoyed by snowmobilers be part of a recommended wilderness area.

We do not think that grooming of the roads leading into the Great Burn should be allowed, including two relevant roads in the Lolo NF.